

NOT LIKE OTHER MEN

By Frederic Van Rensselaer Dey,
Author of "The Brotherhood of Silence," "The Quality of a Sin," Etc.

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CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN IN THE QUESTION.

LISLE'S horse had not borne him much more than a mile when out of the semidarkness in front of him loomed a figure, also on horseback. At the same instant the stranger accosted him by uttering a shout which might, in that clear, still air, have been heard at the ranch.

"Can you tell me if there is a human habitation near here?" he asked as soon as Lisle, pistol in hand—for strangers were not always friendly in that wild country—rode up to him.

"There is one, sir," replied Lisle. "Are you in trouble?"

"I should say so," was the petulant response. "Do you know a ranchman in this region by the name of Craig Thompson?"

"Yes, sir; very well indeed."

"Is it his house that is near here?"

"No. He lives 30 miles away, but my father's house is about a mile distant. Will you go there with me? In the morning I will guide you to Thompson's ranch."

"Thank you, young man. I accept your hospitality most gladly. My daughter will be especially pleased, for she is frightened to death at the prospect of spending the night on the plains, with nothing but the stars for a counterpane."

"Your daughter?" exclaimed Lisle.

"Yes, my daughter. I don't wonder that you express surprise at finding two strangers alone at night in such a place as this and one of them a woman. It is all because of her obstinacy. It's woman's mission to get men into trouble. She would come out here today. I could not prevail upon her to wait until we could get a guide. She never rode a horse in her life, so I found and bought an old wagon, which has done nothing but break down ever since we started, and now it has gone beyond repair."

How much more of an explanation he would have volunteered is not known, for at that instant they were both interrupted by a clear voice calling to them out of the darkness, and presently Lisle saw approaching them a figure such as he had never seen before, not even in his most vivid hours of imagining—the slender, willowy, perfectly clad figure of a woman fresh from the hands of her modiste.

"I could not remain alone in that horrid place, with all sorts of eyes staring at me out of the darkness," she said as she approached. "Who have you got with you, papa? I hope it is not one of those dirty Indians."

"A gentleman, Erna, who has offered to assist us. This is my daughter, Miss Ernestina Thomas. I am Thomas O. Thomas of Kansas City. May I ask what your name is?"

Lisle raised his broad brimmed hat from his head with a courtesy that was instinctively well-replied:

"I am the son of Richard Maxwell, who owns this ranch. I am quite sure that my father will welcome you, although it will be the first time that a woman has ever entered our house."

"If the night were darker, so that I could not see you, I should say that you were a woman yourself," retorted Miss Thomas. "Is your father a woman-hater, Mr. Maxwell?"

"I believe so," replied Lisle calmly. "Have you not another horse, Mr. Thomas?"

"No; I stripped the harness off the only one we had to search for assistance. We left Belmont this morning with the only conveyance that could be procured, and we've been hopelessly lost ever since we started. It comes of permitting a woman to run things for you."

"You were nearer Thompson's ranch when you started than you are now. You have come past it," said Lisle, leaping from his horse. "If your daughter will let me assist her to mount my horse, I will lead the way to my father's house. It is not far."

"What! Ride on that saddle? Sit astride, like a man? I guess not! I'll walk," exclaimed the young lady in dismay. "How far is it?"

"More than a mile."

"Well, that won't hurt me. I walk farther than that in one afternoon's shopping at home. But how are we going to take all my things?"

"We will leave them where they are till morning," said Lisle. "They will not be disturbed. If you are ready, we will start on."

"But I can't go a step without some of my things. Can't you put my small trunk on your horse?"

"I am afraid not. We can wait while you open it, however, and take out whatever you think is necessary."

"We will not do anything of the kind," interposed Mr. Thomas. "The trunks can stay where they are till morning, and Erna can stay here or come with us, just as she pleases. Start along, Mr. Maxwell, and we'll follow."

Lisle was accustomed to absolute authority on the part of fathers, and he obeyed.

prospect of receiving a woman into the house, and furthermore he wished an opportunity to consider what his own conduct should be toward her in juxtaposition with all the prejudice that had been instilled into his mind against her sex. He knew already that he did not like her. She was very different from anything that he had ever seen before, but he remembered that the light in which he had viewed her was very imperfect. He paid no attention to her calls for him to return. The light of the house was in view. That was enough. He had never been taught that it is customary to show women more consideration than men.

He supposed that they should be as self-reliant as men, and this one, he mentally decided, was a baby, afraid of the dark and doubtless of her own shadow. He had the same contempt for fear of any kind that any man of his training would have had, and he did not consider that a woman was particularly excusable for entertaining it.

Richard Maxwell was standing on the veranda when he rode up. He knew that Lisle had ridden away in the darkness, and he was watching for his return, but he was not prepared for the announcement that his son had to make. It astonished, perplexed and angered him all at once, but no trace of these emotions expressed themselves as he said calmly:

"We will make them as welcome as possible."

It did not occur to Lisle to return to the unbidden guests and complete the obligation of an escort, and, having

turned his horse into the corral, he took a seat beside his father and awaited their coming.

"Had you not better retire, Lisle?" murmured Richard Maxwell presently when the dark forms of the approaching guests could be discerned in the distance.

"No, sir. I much prefer to remain until these people arrive. I wish to see what a woman of our own kind looks like. Is it the manner of dress that makes the difference?"

"Dress and training. Let me beg of you, Lisle, not to permit your curiosity to express itself to either of our guests. Such conduct would not be gentlemanly."

"You do not like to have this woman here, sir?" questioned Lisle.

"No. Emphatically I do not."

"I could not do otherwise than to ask them to come."

"Certainly not. Their being here, however, need not necessarily bring you in contact with them or with the woman. I will send Jack over to Thompson's with them in the morning."

"I have already promised to go, father."

"I have other duties for you to perform. It will make no difference who acts as their guide."

The strangers arrived soon afterward. Mr. Thomas came up with outstretched hand, for he had dismounted and was walking beside his daughter.

"Your son has been our savior," he said cordially. "We should have been obliged to pass the night in the open if he had not found us, and God knows what would have become of my daughter before morning. I have been endeavoring ever since your son mentioned your name to me to recall it. I have succeeded. I think we have had some correspondence in the past, Mr. Maxwell. I am the Thomas of Thomas & Armstrong, Kansas City, Mo.; hides, hoofs and pelts. This is my daughter, Ernestina. I hope that we may not put you to any inconvenience, but I can assure you that your house is a godsend to us now."

"You are welcome, Mr. Thomas. Pleased to meet you, Miss Thomas. I regret that there is not a woman in my establishment; so, if you will permit me, I will show you to your room myself."

"If you would show me to the dining room, it would be more to the point. I am simply famishing. As for going to a sleeping room, I much prefer to remain here for a little while. The night is heavenly now that I am not dying with fright," said Miss Thomas rapidly. She disposed herself in one of the big easy chairs and continued, almost without pause: "It is strange that you haven't a woman about you. How do you do your cooking and mending? Who makes the beds and—does other things that a woman ought to do for you? Your son says that you are a woman hater. I don't think there is any sense in that. Oh, dear! I'm completely done up by the terrible experiences we have had today."

"We are provided with efficient servants, Miss Thomas," said Maxwell calmly. "Lisle, will you find Ah Sin and tell him to prepare supper for our guests?"

"A Chinese cook?" cried Miss Thomas. "How lovely! Is he chambermaid too? I have heard that they are ex-

cellent servants and that they are really preferred to women in lots of places. Papa never took me with him on one of his trips before, but I just wouldn't let him go without me this time. An hour ago I would have given the world to be back again in Kansas City, and now I wouldn't be anywhere else than here if I could. What a pleasant room this one is!" rising and passing unceremoniously through the open window. "This is the library? Your son mentioned it to us, but I did not suppose that anybody had such a thing as a real library in this region."

She began an inspection of the bookshelves, which she continued with verbal approval of the bindings until her eyes rested upon the piano.

"Well, I never!" she declared vehemently. Then, raising her voice, she called out, "Who plays upon this—the Chinese cook?"

"No," responded a quiet voice directly behind her. "My father and I play upon it."

"Why, Mr. Maxwell! How you startled me! I did not hear you come in. Whoever would have expected to find a piano here? Why, you are really quite civilized, are you not?"

She raised her eyes to Lisle's when she asked the question, and her eyes and face were much more perfect than her manners, for they were exquisite, but when they encountered the wide-eyed stare with which Lisle was regarding her, her glance sank in confusion, and the red blood suffused her throat and cheeks and brow. Then, because he continued silent and because she knew that he was still watching her, she became angry.

"One would think that you never saw a woman before!" she exclaimed. "I never did," was the quiet reply.

"What?"

"You are the first woman that I ever saw," Miss Thomas said Lisle in the same quiet tone. He was perfectly self-contained. He regarded the beautiful creature before him with exactly the same emotions that he would have felt if he had been standing before a cage in a menagerie, viewing some rare specimen of capture from equatorial Africa. He was studying her physique without approval, mentally rejoiced that his own in no way resembled it. That slender waist, which he might have spanned with his fingers, found no likeness in his own. That swelling bust, prominent beneath the tight fitting tailor made waist, appeared to him like a deformity. The tightly drawn skirt of brown cashmere seemed to him as though it would be a decided impediment to walking, and he realized at once why his wearer had declined to mount his horse. Her hair filled him with wonder. She had thrown aside her hat, and he saw upon her head the most remarkable spectacle he had ever witnessed. Miss Thomas was justly proud of her hair. She had often been accused of bleaching it, but she had the satisfaction of knowing that it was not only natural, but that its tint could not be counterfeited by all the chemicals in the world, and Lisle studied it in amazement. He believed that if it were permitted to fall to its full length it would have reached to the ground, as indeed it would, or very nearly so. He thought it must be very heavy to carry around, and he wondered if she slept with it that way.

While he studied her the anger in her face died out altogether and gave place to an expression of genuine amusement.

"This is the first time," she said presently, "the very first time, in all my life that I ever posed as a curiosity. I rather like it. Go on. I am sorry that I did not think to provide myself with a catalogue. Perhaps, though, I can assist you verbally. What are you looking at now—my boots? They're two, manufactured by Smith & Brown, Main street, Kansas City; quality, of the finest; shape, the latest; style, unexceptional; finish, superb; handsome and warranted; price, \$7.50. What now? Look at them closely; I wear five. My, how cold your hands are! They're like ice. See how warm mine are. Oh, the rings! Did you think they were ornaments? They slip off and on—so. One of them—this one—is an engagement ring, but I shan't marry the man who put it there. How old are you, Mr. Maxwell—more than 7?"

"I am 18." Lisle still kept his eyes fixed upon her, changing his gaze from point to point in search of new surprises and further marvels. He was mentally comparing her to himself, and he thought that there were many points of similarity which he had not at first discovered; also that they were decidedly unlike. To him she was a human paradox.

"Are you really?" she exclaimed. "I should have said that you were much younger. I am 18, too; but then, you are only a boy. That accounts for the difference. Boys don't amount to much."

"I have been taught that women do not," replied Lisle gravely.

"That comes of having a woman hater for a father. It's awfully stupid of him. It will be all the worse for you when you find out what women really are. They'll lead you a dance. Oh, how I would like to have you in Kansas City! Shall I turn around? Would

you like to study my back?"

"If you please."

"Well, I never! There, how do you like that?"

Her figure, though slight, was what any man would have pronounced bewitching, but it did not so impress Lisle Maxwell.

"I do not think that I like it," he said reflectively.

She wheeled around with a suddenness that startled him, but she only stared. For once she had not words with which to express her sentiments.

"Do you wear a wooden jacket beneath this?" asked Lisle, touching her waist gingerly with the end of one of his fingers.

She burst out laughing then—just a low, rippling laugh that was full of melody and so replete with amusement that Lisle smiled back at her.

"Upon my word, you are original!" she said at last. "No; the jacket, as you call it—and it isn't at all a bad name for it—that I wear underneath this one is not made of wood. I don't wonder that you ask, though. Did you never hear of corsets?"

"Never. What are they?"

"They are instruments of torture which every woman is condemned to wear. I don't know why unless it is because our Mother Eve once stole an apple and ate it. You've heard about that, haven't you?"

"Instruments of torture," murmured Lisle seriously. "You do not seem to suffer."

"Oh, we get used to them. If you had been nice to me out there in the dark and had brought my trunk here on your horse, I could have shown you a pair. They are mostly made of steel."

"Steel! They must be bullet proof, then."

"Well, I am not so sure about that, and I haven't any curiosity on the point. Have you quite finished studying me, do you think? Are you satisfied?"

"I ought to be, but I am not. Have I offended you? If so, I beg your pardon."

"Offended me? Not a bit. You're too original to give offense. I'll make papa stay over tomorrow, and you can study me to your heart's content. Will that please you?"

"Yes. I wish that I might see you without!" He paused irresolutely.

"Well, go on. Without what?"

"Without your instruments of torture."

"My Lord!" she gasped. Her face became crimson and then white with

anger. She turned haughtily away, and the next instant disappeared through the window.

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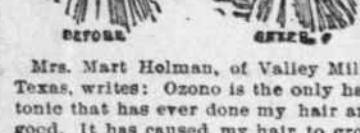
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